

Theater: 'Oliver Twist' as a Musical



Friedman-Abeles

Clive Revill as Fagin and Georgia Brown as Nancy in the British musical, "Oliver"

Wide Gap Between It and Dickens's Novel

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There is a deep chasm between the musical, "Oliver," and Charles Dicken's novel, "Oliver Twist." It is as wide as the distance between a nineteenth-century novelist of genius with a burning social conscience and a musical geared to modern show business.

Lionel Bart, author of the book and songs of the musical, which had its deferred official opening at the Imperial Theater Sunday night, cheerfully acknowledges that his adaptation of Dickens is free. Nor could one quarrel with his need to shorten, reshape and telescope a leisurely novel bursting with character, atmosphere and incidents.

But one may well ask whether Fagin, counting and gloating over his miserly hoard, should emerge as a complacent low comedian. And one wonders whether his odious diggings, where he teaches his unfortunate young proteges that "you've got to pick a pocket or two," ought to be turned into a jolly rumpus room.

Avoiding the angry disputation that erupts in our scorched times whenever someone puts Fagin into a theater or film, Mr. Bart nowhere identifies him, as Dickens did, as a Jew. The old scoundrel speaks like a Cockney. So much for Mr. Bart's tactics.

The Cast

OLIVER, a musical by Lionel Bart adapted from Charles Dickens' novel, "Oliver Twist." Staged by Peter Coe; presented by David Merrick and Donald Albery; production designed by Sean Kenny; lighting by John Wyckham; orchestrations by Eric Rogers; musical director Donald Pippin; technical supervisor, Ian Albery; production stage manager, Ross Bowman. At the Imperial Theater, 249 West 45th Street.

Oliver Twist	Bruce Prochnik
Mr. Bumble	Willoughby Goddard
Mrs. Corney	Hope Jackman
Old Sally	Ruth Maynard
Mr. Sowerberry	Barry Humphries
Mrs. Sowerberry	Helena Carroll
Charlotte	Cherry Davis
Noah Claypole	Perry Lomax
Fagin	Clive Revill
Artful Dodger	David Jones
Nancy	Georgia Brown
Bet	Alice Playten
Bill Sikes	Danny Sewell
Mr. Brownlow	Geoffrey Lumb
Dr. Grimwile	John Call
Mrs. Bedwin	Dorinda Duckworth

By coincidence, however, Fagin has a big number in the second act set to music that bears a close resemblance to Jewish folksong. In "Reviewing the Situation," he ponders the possibilities left open to him as retribution draws near, and a lush violin obligato seems to stress racial strains that the author obviously never meant to suggest.

There is also a line in the lyrics that reveals how Mr. Bart wrote without much concern in his verses about reflecting Dickens and his period. Fagin, if you please, is worrying about "how to win friends and influence people." Or did Dickens presage Dale Carnegie?

If "Oliver" overflows with sentimentality, so does "Oliver Twist." Some of the memorable lines are right out of Dickens, like Mr. Bumble's expostulations that if the law believes he is responsible for his wife, "the law is an ass." But the Dickens humor needs

Adaptation Opens at the Imperial in New York

more air for breathing than a swiftly paced musical can allow it. In "Oliver" it is also more obvious than it needs to be, just as there is more cuteness than one associates even with Dickens.

By the standards of show business, however, "Oliver" has certain assets. Mr. Bart's songs are catchy. Peter Coe's staging pulls out all the stops. When the action turns melodramatic, the stage seeps with turbulence and violence.

There also are several London street scenes that have a Dickensian flavor. Credit Sean Kenny's brilliant sets as an enormous aid to evoking the atmosphere of London; they change and move so swiftly and freshly that they seem to lead an imaginative life of their own.

Clive Revill's Fagin is almost as broad as a caricature, which is the way the role in the musical has been conceived. However, Georgia Brown's earthy Nancy, David Jones's impudent and genial Artful Dodger, Danny Sewell's rough Sikes, Willoughby Goddard's pompous Mr. Bumble, Hope Jackman's shrewd Mrs. Corney, and young Alice Playten's bright Bet are fine. Bruce Prochnik's Oliver has a natural sweetness, but the lad is growing too tall.

In an encounter like the first between the Dodger and Oliver, when the Dodger prepares Oliver jauntily for his raffish way of life in the lively "Consider Yourself," Mr. Bart transmutes Dickens into valid and delightful musical theater. When street vendors sing their charming songs, "Who Will Buy?" under a convalescing Oliver's window on a morning brimming with optimism, "Oliver" has style and quality.

But too often it settles for stridency, smoke, easy laughs and facile show-business razzmatazz.